DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 164 581 TM 008 029

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TITLE Still Photography: Can It Provide Program Portrayal?
PUB DATE Mar 78
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (62nd, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, March 27-31, 1978)
AVAILABLE FROM Center for Instructional Research and Curriculum Evaluation, 270 Education Building, University of Illinois, Urbana, Illinois 61801 ($0.50)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Bias; *Case Studies; Credibility; Educational Programs; Ethics; *Evaluation Methods; *Guidelines; *Photographs; *Program Descriptions; *Program Evaluation

ABSTRACT

Still photography can help portray educational programs for description and evaluation. There may, however, be problems with this method. Photographic images idealize the subjects; the framing is arbitrary, lends importance and veracity at the same time it levels an event to a very thin slice of reality. The evaluator-photographer may have conflicting purposes--art and observational evidence, Still photographs will capture multiple realities. Photographs provide such powerful evidence that efforts to get accurate representations of reality without sacrificing relevance or observational quality raise problems about negotiating the truth, and simultaneously protecting human subjects. To allay those problems, evaluators may rely on various ethical guidelines: (1) taking many photographs across time activities and settings; (2) photographing conventional and unconventional events in proper proportion; (3) triangulating the photographs as they would any other form of data; and (4) negotiating the photographs with rich feedback from participants. (Author/GDC)

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Still Photography: Can it Provide Program Portrayal?

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A Symposium Paper Presented at AERA, Toronto, March 31, 1978

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes several aspects of the use of photography in the evaluation of educational programs. One assumption underlying the paper is that program portrayal best reflects the complexity and pluralism of a program if data is collected by various persons from multiple sources. Photography is one source of visual data which rounds out the observations and the representation of a program's contextual and qualitative elements. Photography can help portray multiple realities, and develop understandings and interpretations of program activities and contexts.

This paper discusses techniques of photographic documentation such as photointerviewing and photoobservation in portraying a program's setting, activities, processes, materials and sequences. Selected issues are discussed, including the role of photography as data, what photography can and can't tell, the reduction of obtrusiveness, technical comparisons, and the ethics of photography. Because photographs have the capacity to distort reality and incriminate subjects, ethical guidelines are developed for the use of photographic procedures. The quality of photographic evidence depends on whether the photographer-evaluator's purposes are aesthetic or observations. The representativeness of photographic data is improved by relying on triangulation and certain ethical procedures.

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Photography is a tool for dealing with things everybody knows about but isn't attending to. My photographs are intended to represent something you don't see.

Emmet Gowin

Portrayal of educational programs using the case study method is a form of evaluation research that seeks approximations of truth through the portrayal of reality (Walker, 1974). It is a form of curriculum evaluation study that is useful under particular circumstances. According to Kemmis (1974) one circumstance is when an interested audience cannot directly experience the program, and cannot judge it accurately without some surrogate experience of it. A second circumstance is when participants in the program are too closely involved in its functioning to be able to step back from it and see it as a whole, though different and unique to each participating observer. In both these situations, a rich descriptive representation of the program may allow its audience--whether onlookers, participants, or distant authorities--to experience something of the program vicariously, and perhaps to understand it better than before. Under these circumstances, the evaluator is faced with the problem of telling it like it is--capturing what goes on, and somehow recreating it for an audience. Still photography captures some of the visual reality of a program, extends images for vicarious experience, and helps tell the story. Photography adds another dimension to Geertz's idea of thick description--layers of interpretation in qualitative data (1973).

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Stake's (1975) responsive evaluation model is one productive approach to program portrayal. Among the criteria for a responsive evaluation are the notions of orienting directly to program activities, and representing the differing value-perspectives present in reporting the success and failure of the program. This is an approach to the portrayal of reality or the bounding of a case that is largely phenomenological. According to this view, reality refers to interpreted experience (Greene, 1977). There are many kinds of experience; so there are many realities.

The concept of multiple perspectives and multiple sources in using the case study method implies that data be gathered from many sources in the scene by as many observers and participants as possible who are likely to have differing value perspectives. The sources of evidence may be represented in several forms that round out the description and heighten the sense of vicarious experience. One such important but neglected form of evidence that helps portray multiple perspectives is still photography.

As another source of observational evidence, photography can help illuminate the context of the program (Walker and Adelman, 1975), honor the localism of the situation by portraying its multiple realities, both unique and universal features (Becker, 1974), and raise the salient issues by providing richer evidence to support them. Still pictures can assist these endeavors by mapping the physical environment, recording sequences of behavior, and documenting students' work. Photographs portray the teachers' transactions with students, the formation and dissolution of peer groups, how students get the teachers attention, the students' access to materials and learning opportunities, and various kinds of social behaviors (Walker and Adelman, 1975). They can be

used for photo interviewing as a focus for feedback as the subject explains his or her meaning and interpretation of the object or event. They can be used in collections as photo essays that document wholistically.

John Collier (1967) sees the camera as a tool of extreme sensitivity which increases the vision of the observer gathering data. The limitations are fundamentally the limitations of the photographer/observer.

Photographs can best provide quality evidence if the researcher attends to important ethical guidelines that improve their representativeness, reduce the bias of the photographer, and protect the subjects.

Photographic Images

Case study evaluations have usually represented programs--the space, time, people, interactions and events in a naturalistic setting--almost entirely with narrative description in natural language.

Written language presents to the reader certain conceptual knowledge, which then has to be translated into images. Photography as an adjunct form of data has the advantage of providing the images as well as information. Photographs may not necessarily be more objective but the images they provide help the viewer focus on events, relationship, gestures, body movement and appearances.

The absence of photographic evidence in evaluations has largely excluded the use visual images by which Susan Sontag (1977) contends we attend and respond. Sontag claims that photography is a form of visual communication which is continuously educating us and changing our images of the world. In teaching us a new visual code, photographs alter and enlarge our notions of what is worth looking at and what we have a right to observe.

There are a great many photographic images around, an inventory that is claiming our attention, shaping our vision, and informing our thinking. This didactic quality of photography has no less promise to inform educational evaluators and researchers when it is used in case studies. Or as the sociologist Louis Hine put it, "If I could tell the story in words, I wouldn't need to lug a camera around."

A Grammar and an Ethic of Seeing

Photographic images embody both a grammar and an ethic of seeing. They constitute a grammar of seeing in that they educate us with a set of rules by which we communicate. They involve an ethic of seeing in that they have the power and equivocal magic, as Sontag calls it, to represent or distort reality.

As a grammar of seeing, photographs convey a kind of knowledge which we cannot distinguish in language (Langer, 1953). Photographs communicate in nondiscursive language with such basic intellectual functions as forms, relations, instances that link meaning and perceptions. They are a visual grammar of images, information and aesthetic cues.

However close they may be to illusion or to truth, photographs are images of expressed forms and patterns of experience captured. Through these images, we think photographically and communicate photographically (Collier, 1967). The nondiscursive language of photorealism is the language that is most understood interculturally and cross-culturally.

As an ethic of seeing, the photographic representation of reality depends on the perspective, interpretation, and purpose of the photographer. The photographer selects, the viewer further interprets and constructs his own reality from them by interpreting and lending his own meaning. Not only is

the potential for distortion present to the point of incrimination, but the intervention in an educational setting of a camera changes the setting and may become an aggression that some subjects do not welcome. They may not want facts or circumstances that are potentially embarrassing revealed. Capturing the slice of reality and framing it in program portrayal involves fundamental ethical questions about the bias of the photographer, the accuracy and quality of evidence, and the protection of human subjects. Is the photograph a relevant, fair, accurate representation of the phenomena under study? These criticisms are like those raised about participant observation and case study in general, concerning the evidence as impressionistic, judgmental and subjective, but made more dramatic by the media of the photographic evidence. In view of these problems, we need to examine the meaning of photographs as research evidence.

The Nature of Photographic Evidence

> Nietzsche said it: *"To experience a thing as beautiful means: to experience it wrongly."*

Photographs are representations of reality that convey a sense of truth. They have an incontrovertible quality of reality--of visualizing relationships, depicting people, illustrating events, recording materials and context, and verifying connectedness. But Sontag argues that despite the presumption of veracity that gives photographs their authority, interest and seductiveness, the work that photographers do is no generic exception to the usually shady commerce between art and truth. While they are taken as evidence of incontrovertible reality, photographs can also be made and interpreted as art. When we look at a photograph in program evaluation, we cannot tell if we are dealing with a piece of reliable evidence or with a work of art. That depends

on the perspective and standards imposed by the photographer, be he evaluator or artist. It is a distinction of purpose more than subject matter.

The distortion of relationships by juxtaposing elements to create tension and make statements about culture is common in art and not acceptable in research. In order to meet standards of artistic integrity, an artist may, for example, stress showing the ugly or the abberant, as Diane Arbus did in her protraits of abberant kinds of persons. Jasper Johns took great care to cast in bronze an outsized Campbell's soup can that made a very disturbing statement about materialistic values, capitalizing on conventional visual images from advertizing. Edward Wiseman's film "High School" is an example of cinema verite that while observing some ethics of fairness, does present an obvious bias of his and the students' views of schools.

Among the early examples of fine still photography in visual ethnography is the work of Dorothea Lange and other photographers working for the Farm Bureau Administration in the 1930's. They often posed their subjects for straight-on shots until they got the expressions that bore out their own social values. Fortunately this is described and known, and we do not expect those portrayals to accurately represent a typical sample of the subjects' activities in context. Not contrived, still the photographic images were distorted for aesthetic purposes of social statement.

Once behind the camera, the evaluator may transpose himself into the artist. Photographs as art can give a false sense of documentation. The urge to make artistic pictures has an impact on what people see and photograph, and therefore has an impact on photos as research evidence. There may be a temptation for the photographer to have multiple purposes while taking pictures for

research and evaluation purposes. The Farm Bureau photographers had two purposes--evidence and art--and applied the standards of both. Their work as research evidence informed public policy, at the same time their art makes the work stand as outstanding photoessays. In such cases, the ethics of each may get mixed together.

The inability of the evaluation audience to distinguish the ethics of the photographer makes it imcumbant on evaluators to apply ethical cannons of the profession in gathering photographic evidence. These ethics in case study research rest on applying clear and explicit procedures to reduce bias and increase reliability of the evidence (Walker, 1974). Since replication is not possible in case studies or with photographs, essentially these procedures involve the idea of triangulation (Stake, 1977). Triangulation is a means of increasing validity by trying to arrive at the same meaning from at least three independent approaches. Attempts to confirm or disconfirm data through triangulation imply choices--the use of three observers, collecting data from three sources, or perhaps going back to the site at three successive times. Applying triangulation procedures to increasing the validity and representativeness of photographs as evidence means taking multiple photos across time and space, cross-checking the photos through feedback from participants in the case, and perhaps using outside observers to legitimate or disconfirm the fit between the data and the circumstances they depict.

A case study is thought to be valid if it gives an accurate and useful representation of the case in a certain setting, with reference to certain research questions (Lofland, 1971). Whether in narrative or photographic modes, observers cannot be made independent of the observer's point of view.

Multiple realities, multiple points of view. Much interpretation of photos will necessarily be left to the viewer. This is a form of naturalistic generalization, and compatible with the reader's experience (Stake, 1977). It gives the audience some burden of responsibility for judging the relevance of evidence, drawing conclusions, or making decisions on the basis of information including photos in the evaluation study.

But photographs have the potential to be an aggression on persons, an intervention in the setting that not every subject welcomes. A teacher or student may not wish to be photographed at that moment or in this activity or situation. But the camera is quick to record, and the moment illusive. In addition, photos may distort reality beyond acceptable evidence and in doing so, incriminate a subject. Some ethical procedures are appropriate in order to mitigate against these abuses.

The usefulness of the photographic evidence to the reader or viewer depends on recognizing the observer-photographer's point of view, and relying on the ethics and validity of the explicit procedures used to increase the validity of the photographs as evidence.

Ethical Guidelines

Some important ethical guidelines for the evaluator as photographer may help improve representativeness, reduce the photographer's bias, and control the possibility of incriminating the subjects. These principles are (1) take a lot of photographs, (2) take photographs of conventional and unconventional behaviors in proper proportions, (3) triangulate the photographic data, and (4) negotiate the photographs with the subjects during the evaluation process and before releasing the data.

Representativeness is improved when photographs depict accurately the range of behaviors and activities in the program across a range of time and settings. Photos should be taken across hours of the day, days of the week, and during a variety of teaching and learning situations, transitions and breaks. These procedures help avoid conveying symbolic inaccuracies, impressions that may lead to misguided conclusions: for example, that the only curriculum being taught is reading; that inter-racial peer groups exist only at the early childhood level; that all children have equal access to the teacher; that a good percentage of the studen's day is spent in waiting; or that teachers participating in the inservice program are expected to transfer it back to the classroom.

The triangulation process described earlier is the primary method of reducing the evaluator or photographer's bias. Series of photographs, sequences taken at close intervals, can also reduce the bias of the photographer, and helps get away from the selection of a single picture as a symbolic representation of a situation (Walker and Adelman, 1975).

Fairness may be improved when representativeness increases. But the evaluator should attend to questions of relevance and accuracy also. Pictures of empty study halls and happy faces working at desks may be powerful, but do not tell much about teaching and learning inside school programs. Here again arise the evaluator's hidden agenda of creativity with the camera. But when the purpose of the evaluator is observational rather than aesthetic, then relevant photographs are likely to substantiate issues that are emergent and can be reported in the study. For example, Rob Walker's pictures of housing in Pineville substantiate and add a dimension to his analysis of segregation conflict and resolution as the primary issue in the schools there.

The protection of human subjects in research is based primarily on the principle that informed consent of the subjects protects them from risk and recrimination. Informed consent is not necessarily sufficient with photographs. Persons own the data of their own lives and deserve to see themselves in photographs before public release because photos have the power to incriminate. Going back to cross-check photos with subjects is imperative during and after the data collection, but also has an inherent danger of negotiating the truth as well. Some steps may be taken to control incrimination and maximize the accuracy and usefulness of photographic evidence.

Assuming informed consent to allow photography in the program portrayal, and assuming nonclandestine methods, even so still photographs may be taken that are incriminating. This can occur inadvertantly in the evaluator's quest for representativeness. Thus, some ethical problems arise after the photograph is taken in regard to its uses as evidence.

Because subjects may be easily recognizable in photos, it is a dilemma for the evaluator to protect his or her sources of information through anonymity or confidentiality in the case of informants who are also photographed. Yet the photographs themselves may constitute useful or desirable evidence. I want to suggest some negotiation steps that may help give anonymity or confidentiality and control the possibilities of incrimination.

The first is to focus on behaviors and processes rather than on persons when taking and retaking photos. To obscure persons' identity, I mean to avoid picturing faces or other identifying features to whatever extent is possible when the incrimination potential is high. Processes may be emphasized

by showing hands on activities, as Bernadine Stake did in photographing Saturday's Children--children's products as they are making them, persons in groups, or individuals shot from behind or the side, so that the person is incidental to what he is doing.

A second control on incrimination is to obscure the behavior in a forest of behaviors. One way is by showing similar behaviors of many role equals in the same predicament. For example, the teacher who is disgruntled during the opera singers' school performance and classroom visit may represent a widespread teacher point of view about outsiders coming into school at the principal's invitation. That can be portrayed. Another way to obscure the behavior and remove the onus is to represent it in a full range of that subject's behavior. For example, in another example, the disgruntled teacher may well feel frustrated daily at that time, having just completed another morning of holding 28 students attention with too thin a curriculum. The import of this is to either assure subjects that they are not alone, or that there may be alternative ways to arrange the curriculum.

The third way to reduce the incrimination is to report the subject's own interpretations of the photograph--his or her own meanings, affect, purposes, and explanations of what was occuring at the time the picture was taken. Such a feedback discussion may in itself reduce anxiety about incrimination, and provide back-up information to include in the report that makes the photographic evidence more useful and relevant.

The fourth way is to limit access to an incriminating picture. This is the ultimate protection to the subject, but sometimes not very practical in terms of rounding out a portrayal. It is also a form of coopting the evaluator that constricts the public right to know what occurs inside a public institution.

Summary

Yes, still photography can help portray educational programs. But photographic images idealize the subjects; the framing is arbitrary, lends importance and veracity at the same time it levels an event to a very thin slice of reality. The evaluator-photographer may have conflicting purposes--art and observational evidence. Still, photographs will capture multiple realities.

Photographs are such a powerful media of evidence that efforts to get accurate representations of reality without sacrificing relevance or observational quality raise problems about negotiating the truth, while at the same time protecting human subjects. To allay those problems, evaluators may rely on various ethical procedures--taking many photographs across time activities and settings; photographing conventional and unconventional in proper proportion; triangulating the photographs as they would any other form of data; and negotiating the photographs with rich feedback from participants.

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